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PAPERS FOR THE PEOPLE. No. 4.

THE BLOOD TAX

BY

JOHN M. ROBERTSON.

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THE BLOOD TAX.

I.

RECENT events have shown that there is felt in England a hearty anger against people guilty, like the Turkish Government and the Turks who are in sympathy with it, of committing or inciting acts of wholesale murder, on political or fanatical motives. To be sure, despite Mr. Gladstone's careful assurance that religion has nothing to do with English sympathy for the Armenians, there can be no doubt that the fact of the Armenians being *Christians*, and their oppressors *Mohammedans*, has a great deal to do with British indignation over the late massacres. Had it been Moslem heretics who were massacred, as the sect of the Babis were massacred in Persia a generation ago, neither Mr. Gladstone nor the Press would have sought to call forth national indignation in the way they have done. The action of the Russian Government in modern times towards the Jews, and towards some sections of its native subjects, has been about as merciless, if not as bloody, as that of the Turkish Porte toward the Armenians; but though there were some expressions of just anger on the subject in England, it was nothing like the recent unanimous shout of indignation. The party which usually speaks ill of Russia does not as a rule mind the cruelties of Governments, and the other party for the most part held its tongue. And at this moment both parties alike are looking to the Russian Government, as a "Christian Power," to join England in putting a real check on the Sultan's crimes.

Still, after making large allowance for the element of special religious sympathy in the matter, we cannot doubt that the mass of our people detest the cruelty of the Porte *as* cruelty, and would detest similar cruelty if it were wreaked on non-Christians, though in that case they would not propose to take any protective action. There can in fact be no question that, age by age, civilised men are tending to be more and more averse to all wanton bloodshed. But it is a grave and grievous fact that, alongside of this recoil from certain kinds of bloodshed, there is a large survival of the *uncivilised* sentiment which is rather pleased than disgusted by stories of bloodshed in which the killing is systematic, carried on in cold blood according to a careful military plan, instead of being done in a fit of religious passion or political panic. At the very time that our journals were heaping curses on the deeds of the Sultan, they were reporting the advance of our own army in the Soudan, where for the second time it has been sent to work slaughter and devastation, shooting down men who defend their own land, and doing it all in the name of civilisation. And when it has chanced that the British troops, fighting at great advantages, have succeeded in killing many of the enemy without losing many themselves, there has been nothing but pride and pleasure on the part of the sympathetic people at home. Why? Because all this is "war," not "atrocities." There lies the sole current excuse for that immense anomaly.

If it were to be said that the English expedition to the Soudan is an outcome of the same kind of barbarity as wrought the massacres of the Armenians by the Turks, military men would be very angry, and

ordinary people would protest. And of course we all know that trained English officers are not ruffians like the Kurds, but as a rule well-bred men who would on no account take part in a massacre of unarmed civilians, male or female. But why is it that the work of homicide, which in its own nature is always horrible, is thus treated as a rather fine function in the one case and as a pure atrocity in the other, when as a matter of fact it might have been avoided as well in the one case as in the other? The Soudan war is not on our part a war of self-defence. Hardly any of our wars are defensive. We are constantly attacking other peoples—weaker peoples—and all the while talking of “imperial defence.” Then a professional soldier is a man who undertakes to kill those he is sent to kill, whether they have wronged his country or not. He obeys orders, and feels his conscience clear. And in truth he is not a whit more to be blamed than the people who send him, that is to say, the mass of his nation, the men who vote, aristocrats and workers alike, and the women who acquiesce in their action. We are all implicated. Are we then in a position to be justly quite so righteously indignant with the Sultan? Have the Soudanese in the mass done us any more harm than the Armenians did him? Does it make so much difference that we rouse the Soudanese to fight us before we kill them, instead of taking them by surprise, when at peace in their own quarters?

II.

This point is surely worth thrashing out. The long and the short of the matter seems to be that the English people, being unmilitary in their own habits, revolt at the thought of a military attack or a mob attack on unarmed citizens; but, having inherited the ancient barbaric sentiment as to the gloriousness of “war,” have not yet learned to regard the trade of killing as unworthy of civilised men. And it is very instructive to notice now, in the countries where the trade of killing is taught to the whole male population, there is much less horror at the Armenian massacres than is felt in England. Bismarck, like the Kaiser, is a strong Christian; but Bismarck and the Kaiser belong to a nation which is systematically trained to the trade of killing, and Bismarck loudly avows, with regard to all Turkish atrocities, the unconcern which may be inferred from the Kaiser’s inaction. When lately asked his opinion about the Cretan disturbances, he declared that he cared no more about them than about a bad pen; and when reproached for that remark he was able to quote from the New Testament (where it is endorsed) the evil old saying that “The Cretans were always liars, evil beasts, idle gluttons.” More recently, one of his journals has spoken of the Armenians as a worthless crew, who do not deserve so much concern from Germans as the sound bones of a single Pomeranian soldier. That is how the spirit of sympathy is developed where soldiery is every man’s trade. And we know that the wars of Prussia with Austria and with France, in which tens of thousands of German as well as Austrian and French soldiers went to their death, *were desired and provoked by Bismarck*, who counted on gain from the wars to his own country. Like other German politicians, he is anxious not to quarrel with Russia, because such a quarrel might be disastrous. But it is not horror of bloodshed that restrains him and them, any more than it was horror of cruelty that in former years moved the Russian Government to seek to protect the Christian subjects

of Turkey, *against* the will of Christian England, then thinking mainly of its commercial interests.

What is the point of all these observations? This, that if we want to exorcise the fiend of cruelty from the earth we had need go further than cursing the Sultan. We had need overhaul our consciences and our accounts in the matter of the killing-trade all round. If we must needs keep up an army so long as there are barbarians who would attack unarmed neighbours, we shall do well to ask whether it is not in nine cases out of ten we who play the barbarian, and the cowardly barbarian at that. And if we must needs keep up a war navy on the ground that otherwise, should a quarrel occur, our shipping would be at the mercy of any enemy with a fighting fleet, we shall do well to ask ourselves whether in simple truth it is not we who do most to force other nations to keep up fighting fleets, on the ground that they must protect themselves against us.

III.

Let us take a bird's-eye view of the ground. The nations of Europe, among them, keep under arms at all times some four millions of men, living more or less stupid and useless lives in barracks and ships, by way of remaining qualified for war at a day's notice. In addition to these, multitudes of young men are every year being trained to the same trade, on the ground that all men must be prepared to defend their native land. And to maintain this state of things there is directly spent every year a sum of money amounting to somewhere about two hundred millions of pounds sterling—an almost inconceivable quantity of purchasing power, over and above some hundred millions more spent in name of interest on national debts caused by past wars, and over and above, further, the enormous amount of loss caused by the withdrawal of so many millions of men from useful industry. And all this stupendous waste of life, time, wealth, and energy, is forced upon Europe by the collective folly of the nations themselves, inasmuch as collective common-sense could dispense with the whole senseless system. We call the total cost the blood tax, and it is truly so, seeing how it drains our vitals. But it might perhaps as fitly be called the folly tax. The folly of each is the burden of all. Each nation nominally arms against the others; and in arming causes the others to arm. Defence is defiance, and protection is fresh danger; and instead of seeing as much and agreeing to slacken the pressure all round, the peoples go on scaring each other into ever larger outlay and madder waste. That this can happen in despite of all modern enlightenment, knowledge and intercourse, is a result of four main causes, the first being the barbaric tradition of esteem for war as a trade, the second, the general capacity for panic fear; the third, the influence of the vested military interests on civilian feeling, and the fourth, the self-interest of the industrial centres which produce ships and material of war. Men listen with a mixture of cowardice and enthusiasm to the oracles of the mess-room; and when German generals insist on the need of keeping up the German war-strength as against France and Russia, or English wiseacres protest that our navy must be twice or thrice as strong as the navies of France and Russia together, the average citizen obeys far more devoutly than he would the voice of his priest. If there be any hesitation, the commercial classes directly interested can always be trusted to join with the military classes in shouting down criticism. We have seen this happen in

England half-a-dozen times in living memory. Every few years it is made out that certain other countries have increased their navies, so as to constitute a possible danger to our commerce; and accordingly we must proportionately increase ours, that is to say, we must not merely equal them but far outnumber them in ships and men. On enquiry, it will always be found that *they had avowedly increased their navies because the previous increase of ours was a danger to their commerce. Thus every increase of our navy, instead of being a fuller protection, is merely a reason for further increase, by evoking new forms of danger.* And this arithmetical progression in folly is made possible by the fact that on the one hand there are thousands of officers wanting promotion, and thousands of families seeking posts for their sons, while on the other hand there are thousands of capitalists anxious to make ironclads and torpedos, guns and uniforms; the mass of the people not having learned to distrust the counsels of profit-seekers or to disregard the ideals of men whose profession is fighting. The question is, will the mass of the people ever learn to do these things?

IV.

Clearly, it is pre-eminently a people's question. Whatever of glory and social distinction goes with the trade of war is reaped by the upper classes. The common soldier, so far from being treated with respect for his profession in time of peace, is subjected to a series of slights. Whatever of money profit is connected with the business is divided between the upper class and the commercial classes: the common soldier gets poor pay and perhaps in the end a poor pension; and his obligations as a reserve man, on leaving the regular ranks, make it harder for him to get steady employment. It is the blood of the common people that flows like water to carry out the quarrels of the ruling classes, who pay as little as may be for what, on their own principles, is an inestimable service. When English politics were mainly controlled by the aristocracy, their treatment of the men who fought their battles was mean beyond all expression. When it was a toss-up between turning Highlanders wholesale out of their country and employing them to "defend the country against foreign enemies," the latter plan was adopted; but when the pinch of policy was over, there was no question of saving the men who had helped to "save Britain." The aristocracy would not even pay wages enough to bring men forward, and the navy was recruited by the press-gang. The poorest industrial class was thus forced to give life and service where the ruling classes gave nothing, the unavoidable outlays of the war being so far as possible made a debt that should burden posterity. And the ships which, when commanded by men of fighting genius, won "glorious victories" for the people at home, were often to be described as "floating hells" by reason of the brutal tyranny used to cow unwilling men. One result was that in the Anglo-American war of 1812, many of the American ships were largely manned by British sailors, who preferred the flag under which they were well treated and well fed to that under which they were bullied and starved. *They* at least had got at the facts behind the parade of "patriotism" and "glory" and "duty to one's country."

Yet, despite such practical knowledge on the part of some sections of the people, the mass of the workers have thus far backed up the militarists and the capitalists, and have thus made themselves fully responsible for the blood tax. If they chose to resist it, all over Europe,

they could abolish it in a generation. Will they choose? Will they forever let themselves be set chronically to fight each other, the workers of one nation marching to shoot and be shot by the workers of another, with whom they have no quarrel, all because their social superiors either find it to *their* interest to create a war, or have not sense enough to arrange their disputes? Nearly every war is in course of time admitted to have been a folly, by the very nation which provoked it. The Crimean war is now pronounced an English folly by Mr. Gladstone and Sir William Harcourt, who both supported it at the time. The folly of the declaration of war by France against Germany in 1870 has long being confessed by the French, whose rulers let themselves be tempted into it by Bismarck. But meantime the common people have perished in battle by the myriad: the diplomatists and journalists have survived, or have died in their beds. Is it not time that the people who have to do the killing and the bleeding, and on whose backs falls the main pressure of the cost, made up their minds to prevent not only the insane wars but the insane preparations for war, not only the bloodshed but the blood tax?

What should induce them to support the system? As the years go on, the rank and file have less and less even of the semblance of "glory" in the business. War, indeed, has in all ages been a much meaner business than it has been commonly admitted to be; battles being far oftener won by one side having the advantage of the other in position or numbers than by bravery; and victories being as often won by cunning tricks as by fair fighting. Many stories of "glorious victory" at sea, on being looked into, are found to be stories of adroit use of an advantage, the beaten side having often made the braver fight. The passion for the tournament and the prize-ring is a low enough passion at best, but when the fight becomes one at hopelessly long odds, between adversaries ill-matched, the story of it can give no shadow of satisfaction to any decent man. Yet such are two battles out of three. One general out-manceuvres another, and so his men are able to kill the other side while running little risk themselves. Such have been some of the recent British victories in the Soudan. What honour, what pleasure, is there for the common soldier, or for his working-class comrades at home, in such "triumphs" as these? Supposing a man in battle to have the beastly ambition of putting a bullet in another man's bowels, what comfort can he have afterwards in the thought of having done it? The new weapons grow more and more deadly; and we are promised bullets whose wounds will not heal. What civilised man wants to deal to his worst enemy such wounds as these?

There is hope that the very horror and hideousness of modern war, once the people are taught to realise what it means, will drive the workers to revolt against it. Indeed, they are already revolting. One of the great merits of the Socialist movement, a merit which outweighs much unwisdom and some manufacture of bad blood, is that it is really destroying the spirit of national enmity, as between the workers of the different nations. Thus the two millions of German Socialists may almost be trusted to refuse to follow their "War Lord" to war if he picks a quarrel for quarrelling's sake; and the Socialists of France and Italy may be at least as much trusted to set their faces against a European War, on the grounds of fraternity, as the French peasantry and middle-class may be trusted to recoil from it on the score of the

danger and expense. In France, too, the great majority of the more intelligent young men resent the waste of some of the best years of their lives in learning the "dirty trade," as they call it, of handling a gun. Still the system flourishes, and when an enlightened man publicly attacks it he is howled down by the journals as "unpatriotic," and deprived if possible of his means of livelihood. And so the desperate blood tax is constantly paid, year after year.

To make a beginning of an end, then, there is needed a lead from some country which is in a position to give a lead in such matters. And what country is better placed for the purpose than England? Our small army is large enough for even its pretended needs. Our navy is much stronger than those of any two other countries. That being so, we have no right to condemn Frenchmen and Germans for keeping up wasteful armaments. It is but a partial gain to avoid actual bloodshed—and we do not even do that—while we keep on like the rest paying the blood tax. It needs, then, that the mass of our people should make it their business to out-vote all attempts to increase the navy further. They have the common-sense to see, if they will reflect, that the policy of forcing other countries always to enlarge their navies, and then making the fact an excuse for further enlargement of ours, which will force them anew to enlarge—that this policy is fit only for knaves or for fools; and that if but England would offer to hold her hand, the other naval powers would in all likelihood be glad to hold theirs, and so make a real beginning in the work of disarmament. Already attempts have been made to set on foot a policy of this kind. Unfortunately Mr. Gladstone, during his last Ministry, met appeals for such action with the answer that "the time was not propitious"; and though Lord Salisbury has since got his side the credit of giving a chance for such negotiations, it is vain to expect that the Conservative party, which is so deeply in league with the militarist interests, will ever do anything serious to oppose them.

No, the lead must come from the people, from the workers. It should come through the party which professes to represent the workers. But these must push if they are to make the party move. If they will not, nobody else can get up the requisite pressure, for in no other class is the general interest so much and so clearly opposed to the policy of ever-enlarging armaments. Among traders there is not only the constant blinding fear of interference with trade, there is the competition for Government orders of all kinds. Even among the workers, it is true, there is an appearance of advantage in so far as Government orders increase employment. But among the workers there is, or there surely ought to be, the power to see these two things:—

1.—*That all naval panics are in the main the work of men who have something to gain from panics; and*

2.—*That every ironclad represents the wasteful spending of wealth and energy which could have made far more house-room and happiness on land for families than it does on sea for single men.*

And from these two facts it cannot be hard to draw the right inference.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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